

On the 50th Anniversary of the Occupational Therapy  
Program at San Jose State University

Sue Robertson,

Career Development: The Road Not Taken

As I move ahead this morning, I would like to show you scenes from the history of occupational therapy. I will tell you a little of my history with the occupational therapy program here. But my history, San Jose State University's history, and the history of occupational therapy are intertwined. Think of the bigger context--the development of the profession--as we go along. Use these pictures to give you a sense of how we fit in and contributed to the bigger whole.

I would like to acknowledge the Archives of Occupational Therapy, previously housed in the Blocker Collection at the Medical Center in Galveston, Texas, the Army's archives housed in the Montgomery Collection at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, Terry Litterst of Boston, and the American Occupational Therapy Association and Foundation for these photographs.

It happens every time...I thought hard about it this time, but yes, I can honestly say *every time*. The plane soars over the bay, lower, lower, until it seems that we will land on the water. If I am lucky enough to be sitting on the left, I look hard, and not too far in the distance. There on the hill going up from downtown San Mateo, I think I can see the neighborhood by Baywood Elementary School and Aragon High School. There, it must be in the trees, hidden..my home. It's when I'm searching, scanning every rooftop, looking for buildings nearby that are the right

height--it is then that I am overcome with the feelings of coming home. I rarely get a chance these busy days, so I feel especially fortunate to be here, fortunate to be coming home once more.

Thank you for the honor of addressing you on this significant homecoming. As I thought about 50 years of faculty and graduates, I wondered who I would meet, who I would remember, who would surprise me with their presence, who I would embrace in sisterhood and brotherhood. Figuratively, we are all coming to the home of our professional selves, to the family that gave us the beliefs of the profession and valued our future contributions to it. So look around you. Welcome each other. Look at how large our professional family is--we, the past and present faculty, the graduates, the present students of San Jose State University's program in occupational therapy.

Coming home--it is such a strong image in our minds! Coming home means many things. Many more than I can list here, but let me give you just a couple of ideas to consider.

Coming home means life has some predictability, some stability, some security. Knowing the routines, the expectations, the accomplishments that have been part of that environment makes it comfortable. We look at our occupational therapy program at San Jose State with that same sense of comfort.

Coming home means looking at where we have been. It forces us to see our career as a continuum. We can clearly judge our growth. We found it hard as students here to look ahead at our career development, but the roads we used along the way sparkle behind us as did Dorothy's yellow brick road, when she looked back

from Oz. We remember what shaped us. We remember our educational achievements as students here. We remember our hopes and dreams

Coming home means honoring where we are now. After leaving this professional educational program, we have taken different career paths, each of us contributing to the profession and our communities in our own way. We can see where we are today, highlight the advantages of the present in our thoughts.

Coming home means evaluating where we are going from here. We sit together now in a safe place from which to look ahead. We can rest, reflect, reminisce, and by doing so, get a fresh perspective. Sit here, set a vision, note forks in the road you might encounter. Calmly, we can see choices often blurred by the hurry and scurry pace of today's world.

Yes, coming home means many things about the past, the present, and the future. We each have made a path that converged here today. We took the road to our professional home. Come a little further with me now that you're here.

As we spend some time traveling side by side in the next half hour, I'd like to focus on a theme I think each of use can relate to in our professional lives. The idea I have used to pull together my thoughts and reflections this morning is career development. Those of you who know me might wonder if I can focus on anything else! This is a theme that guides my daily contributions to occupational therapy and frames my aspirations. I hope our mutual exploration of career development will leave you with pride in your accomplishments and a vision for the future. I

hope you will watch theory emerge from practice as I use myself as a single case study.

As we begin, I am reminded of other occasions that I considered life's paths. One was my graduation from this occupational therapy program in 1973. Another was my graduation from high school in 1966. On both these occasions, I was inspired by a poem I now keep posted on my door at work. Please indulge me a moment while I share Robert Frost's words.

#### The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--  
I took the one less travelled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

We all came here by different roads. Some have travelled straight, smooth, level, lanes laced with wildflowers; they have not strayed far from their chosen travel routes. Others have been riding peaks and valleys, never quite sure when they would see the sun again. Some have hiked paths difficult to discern among the boulders, crags, and cliffs blurring the way. We may wonder about

which roads to take when we part this evening. One thing is certain. Each of us will take a unique road. Yet no matter how straight or twisted, we have no choice but to walk our own roads in life and in occupational therapy.

The path I took to get here may have some merit in the telling. I'm talking about the road I've taken in the profession. The theme I see in my story is developing a professional identity and commitment. As I share my experiences, reactions, and escapades, think of your own career path. Reflect on the choices you made, the growth you have accomplished, and the nurturing you have received and provided.

Career development--What a loaded term! How do I select images from the thousands passing through my mind to share with you? Know that there are many more people to acknowledge than I can share today.

I have organized these random images into three early stages of career development:

First introduction to occupational therapy;

Entering and completing entry-level education and fieldwork;

First job and professional association contributions.

As I think back, please do the same. Ask yourself how that first knowing about the profession carved out a path for you.

Ask how your professional experience nudged you down particular paths, stretching your limits of capability.

Ask what your first job, then all your jobs, did to lighten your travels, to point you in the direction you took.

Ask what professional commitments and association experiences did to help you remove some of the obstacles on your course.

Our career stories begin at the beginning--at our first introduction to occupational therapy. Think back to your first recollections. Did you enter the profession with a career in mind? Many of you who graduated during the first half of the program's life might answer NO. You may have chosen a kind of work that would sustain you until marriage. So many then were women with women's issues. When I entered the profession in the 1970's, statistics showed that most personnel left the field to raise families, then returned after the last child entered school or when the nest was empty. Looking back, I certainly did not think of occupational therapy as a career in those early days. I was among the cohort looking for fulfilling work before settling down to raise a family. I was looking for something in the health field that did not require working with blood, pain, or incisions. I was always a sensitive person and still get dry heaves when I watch children swallow the toothpaste while brushing their teeth! My parents who knew me well, steered me away from medicine and nursing, their chosen professions.

So, how did we begin to be aware? When did you first know (or think you knew!) occupational therapy? Maybe I heard about it tangentially, in my childhood, but it was after my graduation from college when a friend of my father, a psychiatrist, suggested that occupational therapy was a good choice for me that I really sat up and heard. He suggested that the profession matched my educational background in psychological anthropology and my

creative interests in needlework and crafts. So I approached Doris Cutting wondering if the courses I had under my belt related to this new concept I was considering for my future--using crafts in working with people with mental illness. At that point, I had rigid, restrictive assumptions and expectations of the profession. I didn't see any forks in the road--the path seemed fairly clear cut.

Hearing that the program would be a good fit, I left for Europe, eager to experiment with different life styles, different routes through history, different patterns of values and beliefs. Ah, what a crooked path I followed then!

The freedom of that year--it was fantastic. Having completed college in three years, I felt entitled to that fourth year learning by living. I saw Europe in 3 months in a camper, then lived and worked in hospitals in Switzerland as a nurse's aid. I remember calling the director of the large psychiatric hospital where I was working on hearing of a job opening in occupational therapy. I tried to persuade her I was capable of taking that position because I would be starting occupational therapy school when I returned to America. Thankfully, she didn't laugh! But she emphatically assured me I was not ready!!

Then the letter from Doris. Was I planning to come to school? Oh, Yes! First, some prerequisites at the local junior college. Then the plunge into the certificate master's program! And I was at the beginning of shaping my career track. Each course validated or altered my early expectations. Each relationship sharpened my commitment.

It was well into the program--maybe even half way through. I have such a vivid recollection of this scene that it must have been a significant turning point. I was taking anatomy, physiology, neuroanatomy, neurophysiology, and now physical disabilities with Amy and Lorraine. Why, I asked Amy, are we taking all of this to work in psychiatry? Her eyes got big, really big; and she did that little jump. "You didn't know there was a physical disabilities area of practice?" A huge crater just appeared in my path. How would I get around it to my chosen trek toward psychiatry? "Oh" and "Uh Oh"!

What a jumble of needs I presented as a student! A desire to specialize in psychiatry during entry-level education. A challenger of the system--any system--with the exuberance I gave to my civil rights activism of the 60's. An eager independent learner in a structured program designed to build team skills and collegial relationships. But guide me, support me, channel me, develop me, motivate and inspire me the faculty did. And so creatively that I was only partially aware of it! To each of my faculty, here and not here, I give a deep-felt thanks.

So forge ahead I did, a little more apprehensively now. I had just cleared a little undergrowth and I wasn't sure whether the road would dead end or take me further forward. I was walking the high road and the low road at the same time taking the undergraduate courses and the master's level courses in tandem. I made each learning experience a little test to be sure I was in the right field. And as I became more certain, I moved forward with increasing confidence.



The study groups, particularly with Miriam Conley, into all hours of the night. Ivy Iverson's psychosocial classes focusing on developing our sense of self. Kilulu von Prince's hot-off-the-press splinting module. Diana Burnell's experimental semester-long class in evaluation. Lorraine Pedretti's dittoed worksheets that evolved into her text, now thoroughly integrated into occupational therapy curricula nationwide. Eleanor Mann's introduction to the profession--the ethics, professional responsibilities, and range of disabilities, impairments, and handicaps we could expect to see. Ann Murany's administration issues--and fieldwork experiences focusing on management. Phyllis Filbert's gentle counseling as I experienced Senior Clinical and my first patient. Working with Doris Cutting and occupational therapists in the post-professional program to look at current issues. Collaborating with Carrol English to computerize the profession (I still see Fay Maxfield and use Bertha Huber's furniture gratefully). Doing independent studies with Diana Burnell who took me under her wing, challenged me, and enabled me to remain interested in this new fuller profession I was learning. Planning and presenting my computer project as a student presentation at the AOTA Annual Conference in Chicago while Sue Schwartz presented her work in movement therapy. Visiting Lela Llorens' program with pregnant adolescent girls at Mt. Zion Hospital.

So many growth opportunities came my way. Do these scenes bring back memories for you? What made your educational experience significant? Each of these experiences had a purpose

in my career development. They gave me direction, ensured that I had the feedback I needed to follow the road into the profession, and showed me different ways to travel.

Then came the real launching of my career--finishing fieldwork and taking my first job. Up until now my story seems typical. I cannot see where I took the road less travelled by. But the selecting of my first job was truly unconventional. There I was, writing a grant to provide occupational therapy services in a mobile unit to people with mental illness recently deinstitutionalized from Agnews State Hospital. Gwen Wright, Doris, Linda Moorehead--all the big guns were out to counsel me out of research and non-traditional practice as a first career move. But the grant didn't come through, so I did go into clinical practice, kicking and screaming.

My first job did have an opportunity for adventure. Being the first and only occupational therapist in a psychiatric day center placed lots of boulders in my path. Explaining occupational therapy, designing a new program, bumping up against the politics of a cohesive 6-person staff--I needed help, lots of it, at that fork in my road.

Fortunately, I was able to get around that crag. I called on faculty. I asked fieldwork supervisors for their analysis and recommendations. There are so many fieldwork supervisors who have shaped our entry into the profession.

I was able to transfer the nurturing of the program faculty to my new colleagues--too numerous to mention all of them! Without Sue Schwartz as a friend and peer strategist, those first

three years in practice would have been impossible and the remaining years infinitely less rich. Thank you is not enough for all you have done for me, Sue.

The job was one element of that early time in the profession. My involvement with committees, political activism, and state association activities were also integral to my career. All the professional development--the co-leadership with Sue of the first annual conference of the newly-formed Occupational Therapy Association of California, the PSRO activities, the lobbying for state legislation, the development of the Medicare guidelines to define occupational therapy, the long-range planning, and by-laws committee, the mental health study group to learn this new thing called the occupational behavior frame of reference--so many professional activities that enabled me to learn administrative skills in a safe environment. For those of you entering the profession, **use** your contributions to state association activities to develop your career. These are such valuable opportunities.

Although I see this part of my career development as separate from the educational program, I know in my heart they were not that separate. There must have been a link between practitioners and educators that funneled students into professional contributions. And the learning experiences professional involvement afforded me were numerous and meaningful--the beginning of many mentoring relationships I benefitted from.

Then my career was on its way. I moved from clinical practice to academia, from San Francisco to Richmond, Virginia. Despite the culture shock and role reversal, I was able to make a

dramatic shift in the right direction. I learned I was on the proper path then. I knew it when I stood in front of the graduate students. That first year of teaching is challenging, the students are challenging. I used to think that it was my father's value--education. But that one day, I suddenly started crying. I knew that my father's value was really my value, too. I knew that the ultimate value for me was education. It made it easy to select career choices after that; I have been true to my belief that education is the most essential part of life, of one's career.

Then came the choice to make a move to enable more scholarly contributions. I took the job offer from the American Occupational Therapy Association so I could pursue my doctorate and return to academia.

AOTA was one of the affiliations I wanted, but was unable to add. While in my final semester of school, the chance to go to AOTA as a student became available. Now it is a regular and invigorating part of our National Office program. For those of you able to choose this incredible benefit, do it. You will not regret the scope of knowledge, the contacts, the vision you can glean from this experience. The management skills I learned there will serve me well, wherever I go.

Now I find myself full circle in my career--back in an academic setting, this time on the other side of the dynamic. I am excited about teaching--trying to show the profession to eager students, deciding how best to convey the importance of and practice of therapeutic use of self. I am intrigued with how to

best pass on the culture of occupational therapy to the next generation. My doctoral work is a place of true centering in my life. My undergraduate degree is in psychological anthropology. I was focused on child-rearing and how it perpetuates culture in my college studies. Now I find that early interest re-emerging in my priorities. My doctoral research is on stress and decision-making, the relationship of affect and cognition. It stems from a desire to understand child abuse more fully. Are people who abuse children learning a culture, is some set of values and habits being passed between people? Why do some people who have been abused continue to abuse others? Why do others choose not to abuse? What is there about our culture that is passed by child-rearing and what factors alter the effect of parenting? Fortunately, I have a research interest that should take me well into retirement!

Career and development. I have revealed my personal sense of these words, hopefully conveying the purposefulness of my career and quickly, very quickly, highlighting some of the developmental milestones I mastered. What I hope to show is that we are all always developing.

As you went with me, did you begin to ask yourself the kinds of questions I have been pondering? Did you look at the early assumptions and expectations you brought to your career path? Did you reconsider what your early beliefs about the profession were? Did you review your educational experience--the content, the process, the influences? Did you relive those first few years of practice--and think of them as the link between education and

practice? Did you examine the nature and scope of your professional involvements and the benefits you have gleaned? I hope you have touched on some of these questions. Perhaps your time quietly reflecting will give you some insights about directions for the future, about relationships to build as the faculty here showed yesterday with their stellar papers and formal discussions. Perhaps you have validated the career path you have chosen. Perhaps you saw new places to express your appreciation to those who have cleared the path for you, discovered new teams to build.

Career development is certainly one side of our lives. Equally important is the development of our personal and spiritual and social lives. These, too, I have tendered, though I admit to a lesser degree than my passion for occupational therapy. I have often considered the seeming dilemma in my life--career versus personal roles.

The bottom line is that, for me, they are almost one. I feel fortunate to have found a life's work that is so closely aligned with my views of people, of communities, with my values, beliefs, and goals about my own life and my potential contributions to society. Each of us must examine that for ourselves.

There is a scene I lived that sticks with me, as alive as if I were there right now. I'd like to move to it now as we each think of events and people that have contributed to our personal development.

I would like to tell you a story about a road I took once. Several times I have travelled to foreign lands. Once I went to Scotland to explore my roots. I went to learn about the cultural influences so many times removed from me, but influential nonetheless. I still mark time by education, by when I have learned issues of consequence in my life!

The trip to Scotland was very meaningful. I felt I had come home. Things were familiar and comfortable even though I had never been there before. I was the explorer, linking the present to the past and finding new options for the future.

How I enjoyed waking each day to decide what to do, what felt right for the moment! One day I boarded a van which guided eight strangers on a day tour of various spots in the countryside near Edinburgh. We saw nature's wonders, a local crafts shop, small villages, and the homes of the famous. At one point we were directed to view a lively scenic river dock. To get there, we could take one of two paths. Yes, I took the one less travelled by! and that made all the difference.

There were few things to catch my eye on the road I took. I remember mostly the brambles and shrubs on the side of the road, the pebbles underfoot, and the leaves overhead dancing with the sun. I could see the river to my left in between the tree trunks now and then.

It was the smell, I think, that caused me to look more carefully at the bushes to my right. There I saw him, twisted and distorted, a ram caught in the flimsy barbed wire fence. Flies buzzed around his eyes and nose and mouth. His body rested on his

forelegs bent under his chest. But his head looked forward to the river and up to the sky.

I never did make it down to the river. I went past him a bit, but returned only moments later to stop there and reflect on the predicament of this gentle beast. He hung next to me, bigger than life, stopped short on his quest for the sweet river by this thin fence of wire.

I wanted to change the scene. I brushed away the flies. But I could never change his fate. It was too late to give him better directions and there were no other sheep nearby to warn. He and I were there alone. But I made his being a significant scene in my life map, as I pondered the crossing of our paths.

Each of us can do the same thing. Look around again at the significant people and events in your lives. What have you learned from them? What have you drawn into your own lives? How will they change the road you travel? Have they and will they make all the difference? Keep on with this reflection on your career and personal development.

This is a time that our roads converge--here, right now. We are at a significant moment. As we look at the graduates present and remember the many not here, numbers alone support the notion that this program has had widespread influence on the profession. One may even say the power and influence of this program has increased over the years. Coming to our mutual starting point, we can celebrate our professional beginnings, appreciate those who packed our bags with the ideas, skills, confidence, and aspirations that have carried us through today and will take us



well into the future. We can reflect on our individual careers and we can admire the strategic development of the educational program at San Jose State University. Some of you have had keen visions of the road to choose. You saw the signs early. You were the early explorers, the mapmakers. You marked the way for the rest of us who now walk on well worn paths. Thanks to our early leaders for setting the pace and preparing the stepping stones so that our individual paths have been easier to travel.

And thanks to Amy, Lorraine, and Lela and all who helped arrange this celebration.

I would like to pay a special tribute to my mother who is here today with her new husband Bill. Although a nurse, she has always been an honorary occupational therapist in my eyes. She is acutely aware of the purpose and meaning of a life well lived. This past year especially, she has modeled the importance of self-discipline to reach her goals. She is the finest example of resilience and adaptability and their power to create aliveness. For the model you have been to me, Mummie, I thank you.

To look back 50 years, down a road no one knew would lead here, is impressive. It is revealing. Being here today is one of those events in our lives that will stand out as other memories fade. And now, as I end, I know I am truly glad that I took the road less travelled by at several points in my career. Thank you for walking with me for awhile. I wish you all good fortune on your journeys.